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AUTHOR Kleckley, Bettie Joyner
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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study examined students' definitions of violence and aggression, the context in which threatening situations occur, and the strategies and consequences that a group of 30 urban African-American elementary school children used when they were in threatening situations. Data were obtained from several sources, including participant observations, formal and informal interviews, and interviews/conversations with parents/caregivers, the school principal, and school staff. Findings revealed more similarities than differences among school staff, parent/caregiver, and student definitions of violence. However, children over 9 years and their parent/caregivers gave more emphasis to nonphysical or emotional injury, specifically acts of disrespect toward a person or their family, than did school staff. School staff and parents/caregivers had very little positive interaction that might help them develop a transformative relationship that would incorporate conflict positively, value participants and their skills, and have a problem-solving process. Rather, each group's words illustrate the negative, stereotyped images they formed as a result of the lack of contact with one another. Conflicting messages to children regarding what to do when other children are aggressive were noted. Although the principal and professional staff located the source of violence outside the school, students identified violence and aggression as occurring regularly at school. Staff encouraged competition without recognizing that it might foster conflict. Parents/caregivers believed that most teachers cared only about their paycheck and did not have respect for the parents/caregivers. Implications of the study's results relate to several potential changes in the approach used to prevent violence and aggression, including changing the relationship between student and teacher, emphasizing higher order thinking skills, stressing children's capacities, and building upon the community-based knowledge of children and their parents/caregivers. (Contains 65 references.) (KB)

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Connecting School Policies and Praxis to the Development of Violent and Aggressive Behaviors in Elementary School Children: Locating the Voice of the Student

Bettie Joyner Kleckley, Ph.D.
Temple University

Introduction

Grounded in a postpositivist paradigm, this research traces some of the processes that may lead to the ability for children to solve their problems without the use of violent or aggressive behavior. The project was conducted over a four month period in an urban community with low income, African American, elementary school children. A critical ethnography, this study locates violence and aggression within the qualitative framework of inquiry. Presenting the *emic* or insider's view, the definitions in this study come from the words of the participants. The research questions of this study focused the inquiry to the investigation of the participant's definitions of violence and aggression, the context in which threatening situations occur, and the strategies and consequences that a group of 30 urban African American elementary school children used when they were in threatening situations.

It was not the purpose of the study and subsequently of this paper to place blame with schools and staff nor does it seek to identify a "cause" of violence and aggression. Recognizing that there are multiple layers of influence that underlie choices of action, there seems to be a connection between school policies and practices used at Crosstown School (names are fictitious) and the children's use of strategies that involved violent or aggressive behaviors.

Overtly, the schools place emphasis upon the cognitive domain. Historically there have been secondary purposes that do not directly relate to academic development. Schools have used models influenced by Piaget to determine universal standards for the achievement of developmental milestones (Piaget, 1963). Within these models, emphasis has been placed upon

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the deficits of those students who do not achieve those milestones. Students who do not achieve at the accepted rate have been described as "deficient," and "at-risk for failure." Educators, as the gatekeepers to higher education, often place limitations upon the life chances of this group of students (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Montgomery & Rossi, 1994; Swadner, 1995).

In traditional pedagogical models, students are seen as recipients of knowledge or "empty vessels" who must be given information to learn (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billings (1994) has used the term "assimilationist" to describe the organizational models and practices used with children who are regarded as "knowing nothing." Students, especially in elementary schools, are not expected to be active participants in the educational process. Freire (1970) described students who were recipients of knowledge within a "banking" model of education. In the "banking" model, knowledge is stored for use at a future time. Further, children are considered to be dependent upon adults and requiring adult assistance (Pai, 1990). Policies and practices place adults in control of the children's environment and influences. School staff members view the school environment as a sanctuary from the experiences with violence and aggression that their students bring to school. Many school staff members fail to acknowledge the contribution that the school environment might make to the development of violent or aggressive solutions to problems (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

Post-positive, post-modern researchers have sought to develop teaching models that are culturally relevant and free of bias based on gender, ethnicity, economic level, or learning style. In these models, there is a need for a change in the relationships between all of the participants in the educational process. The classroom relationship would be founded upon assumptions of capacities and that students of any age may contribute to the educational process. Differences are

identified and incorporated into a learning process that is viewed as holistic and contextual rather than reduced to discrete variables (Delpit, 1995; Giroux, 1995, 1997; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Ladson-Billings (1994) described some pedagogical models that led to academic success for African American children. Within these approaches and others described as culturally relevant models, educational delivery builds upon the already developed knowledge, learning styles, and skills of the children through collaboration and cooperation.

Conceptual Framework

Grounded in a positivist framework, most violence and violence intervention programs have attempted to address determining factors and variables. Research on violence has focused on the deficit model of individual, environmental, economic, ethnic and cultural attributes. The results of this approach have been inconclusive. In a post positive perspective, actions and perceptions are not separable into discrete variables. Actions, experiences, and perceptions are holistic or contextual. Very little educational research or formal investigations have focused on the personal interpretations or the voice of African American elementary school children from the view of capacity rather than a deficit perspective.

Methods

A critical ethnographic model for inquiry was used in this study. Expanding on the effectiveness of an ethnography described by Spradley (1979), Thomas (1993) and Ruback and Weiner (1995), a critical ethnography assists in clarifying faulty perceptions, eliminating hegemonic practices, dispelling stereotypes, and fostering democratic relationships among the stakeholders. Critical ethnography is appropriate for a democratic research relationship in a study that is *with* the participants (Carspecken, 1996; Fetterman, 1989; Thomas, 1993). The design of this study permitted the empowerment of the participants and supported the researcher as

interventionist or social change agent. Not only was data collected about the views of the children and their families but the children were helped to identify peaceful ways of managing violence and aggression in their lives.

Definitions in this study were not established *a priori*, but were generated by the participants themselves. In the participants own words, there are descriptions of their daily lives, and experiences in and around the Crosstown School (names are fictitious). Data was provided by several sources: a) observations; b) participant observations; c) formal interviews; d) informal interviews; e) small group interviews; and f) individual interviews. The interviews were semi-structured or focused in the sense that they concentrated on issues of violence and aggression. Not all participants were asked the same questions. Participants in the project were 30 African American, elementary school children who reside in an urban community. Interviews and conversations were conducted with many of the parents/caregivers of the 30 children, and with the principal of the school where the children attended at least for a portion of their school career. Professional and non-professional members of the school staff were also interviewed in order to record their perspectives.

To overcome the limitations related to the length of the study I included children from a cross-section of the school community from different age groups. Limitations from the target population of elementary school children were overcome by the use of cooperative, collaborative models of research supported by a critical ethnography. Important in working with children and in conducting interviews with them is being willing to listen to them, and allowing for the possible need to arrange interviews in small time segments because of short attention spans. Also of assistance is having an awareness of the popular culture or trends that they may use in their

discussions. Having a variety of data sources also served to increase the validity and reliability through triangulation.

Findings and Conclusions

Because ethnographic inquiry permits inquiry into multiple layers of human experience, data analysis and findings are often non linear. Further, there are not clearly defined borders between categories and themes revealed by the data analysis. In the following presentation of findings and conclusions I have attempted to group the data according to theme based topics although the material may fit into more than one theme or category.

In informal discussions with school staff members they predicted major differences between their own definitions of violence and those of the children and their parent/caregivers. There were, however, more similarities than differences in each group's definitions. Each group indicated that violence involved some type of physical injury. The inclusion of non physical or emotional injury by children over age nine and their parent/caregivers was an area in which there was difference in the definitions. The difference was primarily one of emphasis. Acts of disrespect toward a person or their family were considered by the children and their parent/caregivers to represent emotional injury. In the following sections of this paper I show that the school staff and the parent/caregivers had very little positive interaction which might serve to help them develop a transformative relationship. Transformative relationships incorporate conflict positively, place value upon the participants and their skills, and have a process for solving problems. I will present the words of staff members and parent/caregivers as each group speaks about the negative, stereotyped images they have formed as one result of the lack of contact with one another. Additionally, I present a description of the school policies and

practices that serve to perpetuate a gap between the school staff and the parent/caregivers of children at Crosstown Elementary School.

Participant Definitions

The children gave two general types of responses to the question "What is violence or aggression?" One type was to make a straightforward statement beginning with "violence is" followed by an action word. The second type of response, given by most of the children, nested their definitions of violence within descriptions of situations. In listening to the children define violence it became clear that their definitions of violence were contextual. Therefore, the reasons for violent behavior were nested within a particular situation or series of related events. The following excerpt from a formal taped interview is from a discussion between Amalia and Issa both age seven. The excerpt provides an example of typical answers to the question "What is violence or aggression?"

> Amalia: Violence, I know violence means being bad, fighting, doing drugs, killing people...
> Issa: Selling drugs or killing people.

During another formal taped interview, Kahmia, age 11, said violence is "...People being hurt and people getting treated the way they don't want to get treated." By around age nine the children extended their definition to include non-physical categories of injury.

Definitions given by parents reflected those of the children. Further, for the parents, being disrespectful to another person or to their family was a form of mental violence. Mrs. Moon indicated emphatically that,

> To me, I look at violence like if someone is hurting you or disrespecting you or your children, your home, I consider that violence. For me, I consider that violent.

Mrs. Moon and other parent/caregivers did not wish their children to become constant victims or targets of violent acts. They viewed a setting as violent if their children reported being hit or shown disrespect. Many parent/caregivers in the study admitted that they often encouraged their children to respond in kind to violent or aggressive behavior in order to protect themselves, no matter what the setting. When the children retaliated by hitting others, the school staff viewed their actions as indicators of violence and aggression that was modeled at home. The school staff then developed and made evident their low opinion of the parenting skills and techniques that were used in the children's homes.

School staff members spoke during informal sessions. There was a clear hierarchically based distinction between the professional staff and the non professional staff. Teachers as professional staff were second to the principal in the hierarchy of the Crosstown school. Non professional staff consisted of the classroom aids and classroom assistants and the custodial staff. Although non professional members might be present during a discussion, they were not included in the discussion. Professional staff members indicated their lack of respect for the skills of the parent/caregivers. They described the first graders as having violent behaviors. Ms. Baker, a classroom teacher, made a comment that others present said summarized the way they thought first graders at Crosstown played,

> When they play, they often injure each other. They think that when they hit each other over the head they should still be fine. Just like they see on television cartoons.

When school staff members described what they perceived to be their students' lives outside of the school, they spoke of lives surrounded with violent individuals. In their discussions, one heard statements like "I can only imagine what their lives must be like, surrounded by all of the violent people and violence." As a group of school staff members talked in an informal session, they

characterized the students in first grade as having violent behaviors, and language. Typically they said, "The first graders know all of the bad words, but they don't have any idea what the alphabet sounds are." Staff members indicated that often the first grade children showed no remorse, were apathetic, and basically irresponsible.

By third grade, staff members say, the children are angry, aggressive, and defiant to adults and others in authority. Another teacher, Mrs. Clark told of how the children were a reflection of their parents. She said,

> It's no wonder that the children ignore us when we talk to them about fighting. When their parents come to school, they are really rude and complaining because their child got into a fight. But, where are they during report card conferences? When they come up ready for a fight, they sound and act just like their child does in my class.

Many staff members said that except for times when parent/caregivers came for a problem, they didn't have much contact with them.

Checks and Balances at School

In principal Spencer's view, violence and the responses to it differ in the school and community. He identifies characteristics of violence in the elementary school as threats to other students or pranks. However, "the parents who are responsible for these children's violent behavior" tell their child to hit back. They don't say "that's when you're at home...when you're at school, if somebody hits you, then you must tell an adult." To Mr. Spencer, violence and aggression are different inside and outside the school because there is order and

> ...some checks and balances and policies in place. You know, if you knew, outside the school, every time you hit somebody, that person could tell somebody else, and immediate response would happen, then I don't think you would see that much in the community.

Principal Spencer emphasized that school policy was to promote an adult centered domain in which the adults handled problems among the children. Although Principal Spencer spoke of

changing the hierarchically based school organization to a more collaborative model, he was referring to adults. The children were not participants in developing strategies for solving problems at Crosstown school.

Not all of the staff members surrounded themselves with messages indicating that they were supportive of that policy. I observed posters on the doors of two first grade classrooms that posed the questions "Are you a tattle-tale?" and "Don't be a tattle-tale." This meant that the children were given a conflicting message about what to do. On one side, the official policy told them, "when you have a problem, seek an adult." In practice, however, they might find an adult who asked, "are you tattling?" or "are you a tattle tale?" thus discouraging them from seeking an approved form of assistance. Instead, some of the children received a message that they had to develop their own strategy.

Mrs. Castle, mother of Amalia, age seven and Keshia, age six, discussed the mixed messages she and her children had experienced when they tried to report aggressive behavior to an adult at the Crosstown school. She talked about adults who regarded the children as problematic and deserving of any violent actions they received from other children. She described several occasions when her children told her that some adults at school were not willing to help solve their problems. She said that these people believed that the children were bad and told them "oh you go sit down because you probably deserved whatever they did to you." She spoke of how frustrating it was to try to teach her children to solve their problems peacefully when some members of the school staff did not support the practice. In a formal interview Mrs. Castle stated, "raising 'don't hit' children in a 'hit' environment" was not easy.

Conflict Resolution

Kahmia, age 11 and Clara, age 10, had participated in the project during the spring. During the summer sessions we began to put together a fuller picture of their behavior. We noticed that they often walked out of sessions when they were in certain kinds of situations. Some of the circumstances under which they would leave were: when they were confronted about their inappropriate behavior, if they were not selected first for something they wanted to do, or when their wishes were not complied with in a group. Their action would be to stalk out of the room, forcefully pushing or slamming the door. When observing either child in the hallway I found them sitting alone with arms folded across the chest. Typically, the shoulder and neck muscles would be tight and the mouth would almost form a tight, straight line. My interpretation was that they were angry. After a small amount of coaxing, they discussed the problem that led to their exits from the room. They told me that they had received training in conflict resolution during the school year. The program in which they had participated placed emphasis on walking away from threatening or stressful situations. They said "whenever I am someplace and I feel stressed or tense, then I have to leave. They taught us that!" In practice, however, their choice of action was selective. They tended to remain in the situation if they were at a physical advantage or in control of a situation. If they perceived any type of attempt to have them reflect on their incorrect or inappropriate behavior, they would exit, stormily. They wanted things to end or become resolved on their own terms.

Hierarchical organizational structures have long been established in schools. In charge of the school based hierarchy, the principal was responsible for determining policies and practices used in the school. Teachers have often been excluded from decisions involving policy (Conley, 1991; Lieberman, 1988) but have maintained control over the pedagogical practices in their own

classroom. In a hierarchical, teacher controlled and directed model of education, the students at Crosstown school were taught to seek an adult to solve their problems. Little or no guidance was provided at Crosstown school in the development of problem solving skills. In conflict resolution programs the children said they received a script for use in threatening situations, however, when the script could not be applied to an incident, children developed their own strategies for action that might include violent or aggressive behavior.

In the literature and at Crosstown school, several strategies have been taught to the children to help prevent violence and conflict (Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Prothrow-Stith & Weissman, 1991; Reiss & Roth 1993). Among the strategies, conflict resolution is taught as a process comprised of steps and scripts that the participants learn. Based on the results of research by Johnson and Johnson (1996), there are problems with the strategies learned in some of the conflict resolution programs. The children often inappropriately used the scripted strategies they learned resulting in adding another layer of complexity to the problem instead of developing possible solutions. Separately, researchers have examined the negative impact of a competitive environment upon interpersonal relationships (Bush & Folger, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Reinforcing a competitive environment, the conflict resolution programs often encourage a concept of "winning" or of "right" and "wrong." At Crosstown, approved strategies involved seeking a teacher or other adult to solve problems, walking away from threatening situations and telling parent/caregivers about problems with their children. Left without skills to solve problems independently that would reflect mainstream values, some children solved their problems on their own with physical, and non-physical forms of violence or aggression. Ogbu (1985), Anderson (1990), and later R. D. Taylor (1995) addressed this type of problem as they found that African

American adolescents often display behaviors that reflect values that are considered to be alternative or unconventional in the mainstream.

Insulated Lives

The parent/caregivers of these participants did not consider the lives of their children to be filled with violence. Mrs. Brown, mother of Clara and Kahmia, spoke of her three children one of whom is 16 and did not participate in either the spring or the summer program.

> Well they haven't really growed [sic] up like around a lot of violence. Like seeing...a lot of things like muggings and stuff going around, robbery and stuff into the neighborhood where we live at, our environment, and around here...there's a lot of shooting, we hear the gunshots around here but we don't see what's happening. The next day we never hear about any of it so it's not really living into it...

Mrs. Brown, and others in the neighborhood, felt insulated from the violence in the surrounding community. They felt that their children did not have personal experience with the violence in the community. They were aware that there is violence in the world, and in the neighborhood but they only saw it on the television news.

Many parent/caregivers who were interviewed saw the positive qualities of the neighborhood. Their view was very different from the way the school staff characterized the community. The parent/caregivers felt insulated from the violence that might exist "out there" in the community and the world at large. At this time, with the possibility of outsiders coming to their neighborhood, parent/caregivers believed they needed to provide constant supervision for their children when they were outside. They attempted to provide their children with very sheltered, supervised lives. In the next section the children identify the context within which violence occurs in their lives.

Where Violence Occurs

Although the principal and the professional staff had located the source of violence outside of the school, in the children's discussions the things they defined as violence and aggression, occurred regularly in the school environment. Several children observed, "There's violence in school!" Most of this violence, according to the children, occurred in the common areas of the school, such as the bathrooms, lunchroom, and school yard. This finding confirmed research by Astor, Meyer, and Behre (1999) who found that violent and aggressive acts in a high school occurred in these same areas of the school building. These areas were described by Astor et al. (1999) as "unowned" spaces in which there seemed to be little or no sense of responsibility for supervision among the professional staff. After the children at Crosstown repeatedly reported problems to their parent/caregivers, the children were advised to fight back if they were hit.

Discussion about violent or aggressive situations at school most often related to areas of the school building other than the classroom. From the observations of the children, measures were taken in the building to protect them from violent and aggressive children. During a formal small group interview Amalia and Issa, two of the four children in the group discussed the use of guards for the bathrooms during the school year. Both children were age seven. Amalia carefully tried to emphasize the difference between the regular school year at Crosstown and the summer programs that were housed in the school building.

Amalia:...this is recreation here, I'm talking about at Crosstown. This is Crosstown but I'm talking about...(pointing and gesturing at the building)
B.J.K. : During the school.
Amalia: During the school. It's this boy who is always in the classroom and he like talks a lot and then when he asks to go to the bathroom he plays in the bathroom, that's why it's a...
Issa: Joseph Lord.

Amalia: That's why there's always guards they watch in the bathroom doors, like playing around and stuff like that, that's why they got guards and one of them... we had problems.

Issa: He [Joseph] tripped me and then he told me to leave and then I went to go to my teacher and then these boys walking around started hitting me in my back and as soon as I got to Miss Florence I started to cry. Then I was being brave and then I hit him back, but one boy I punched him in the thing and it started to bleed and he was crying like a big baby.

In their perception, the guards were provided to protect them from other children who may be violent. Curious about the "thing" that Issa had made bleed, I asked her to identify it. Issa and Amalia blushed and smiled. They finally pointed to where the "thing" would be. Issa had punched Kenny in the nose.

At Crosstown Elementary School, staff members indicated that, in their view, school and school based relationships were not the original source of violent or aggressive behavior for the children. In the opinion of the school staff, the source of violent and aggressive behavior was the environment outside of school. Staff members did not acknowledge that the environment in school might be filled with conflict. Typically, schools and their staff members have traditionally attempted to ignore, or unnaturally suppress conflict. Competition among the students is viewed as a positive activity that encourages students to learn and succeed. The fact that it might foster conflict is often ignored. Because of the practices and policies used in the school environment, children are often unable to develop skills that would assist them in using conflict positively or to develop skills and strategies they might use in threatening situations.

At school, acts of physical retaliation were viewed as an indication that the children were bringing violence into the school from home. The professional school staff did not see that the school environment might foster violent or aggressive behaviors. Staff members, responding from within a deficit model, described a group of parent/caregivers who lacked appropriate social-

emotional skills. Professional staff members often indicated that if the children followed school rules, then violence, conflict, and the problems that result could be kept to a minimum. In the sanctuary of the school, the members of the school staff would handle conflicts and solve problems for the children. If any problems were to erupt at school, it would be due to the way children had been influenced outside of the school setting. Professional staff members saw very little in the school environment that would lead to the development of problematic behavior.

Many school staff members often fail to acknowledge the contribution that the school environment might make to the development of violent or aggressive solutions to problems (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). At present, school practices foster a climate that is competitive (Johnson & Johnson, 1996), exclusive of other viewpoints (Giroux, 1988; 1991a, 1991b, 1993, 1997), and hierarchically authoritarian (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). The school environment fails to promote collaborative, democratic practices (Gutman, 1987), fosters social reproduction (Bordieu & Passeron, 1987; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Delpit, 1995; Tyack, 1974; Willis, 1977, 1983), and often fails to meet the educational needs of low socioeconomic level students of color (Delpit, 1995; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 1987, 1991; Pai, 1990).

Developing Stereotypes

There seemed to be a lack of authentic communication between the parents and the professional staff. Each group, having developed stereotyped images of one another, did not interact or communicate unless there was a problem. Principal Charles Spencer said he was making an attempt break down some of the hierarchical barriers that had been established in the school by the previous principal. He said, "I strongly believe that wholeheartedly...'No Man's an Island' and there's always somebody that you're connected with that would give you a better insight of what you're doing..." He said that he liked to be collaborative and brainstorm with his

staff for problem solving. Principal Spencer talked of the problem that violence creates in school. As he saw it,

> violence in the school is something that is an extension from the home and, you know, the community which they live in, but it's treated differently in the school.

Principal Spencer specifically locates the source of violence to sources outside of the school environment. Other members of the school staff agreed with the analysis presented by the school administration and support the policies and practices that were used at Crosstown.

At Crosstown School the community seemed to be outsiders in the school, and the school staff seemed to be outsiders in the community. In this environment there seemed to be many closed borders that would prevent the free flow of information or communication between the groups. We saw the parent/caregivers as supportive of our project. They often came to our rehearsals which were housed in the school, but they did not attend Home and School meetings. Since the parent/caregivers did not attend school sponsored activities in large numbers, the school staff viewed them as uninterested in their children's educational progress. Most of the professional school staff verbally supported the theater project during the spring semester, but only one person, Mrs. Bright a first grade teacher, attended the program.

Parent/caregivers participating in the study had a stereotyped view of the school staff, and especially about the professional members of the staff. These stereotyped views became evident in this study during the interviews and discussions with the parent/caregivers. Several parent/caregivers in this study said they often felt alienated from the school staff and their practices. Each of the parent/caregivers interviewed in the study said they were actively involved in the education of their children. From observations of Home and School activities and meetings, however, parent/caregivers did not participate in school sanctioned activities. In this

study, as in the literature, when parents did not attend school sponsored activities some of the school staff would interpret the lack of participation to be an indication that the parent/caregivers were not interested in their children (Berger, , 1987, 1991; Epstein, 1987, 1995; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Finders & Lewis, 1994; Lareau, 1987, 1989; Lightfoot, 1978; Sasser, 1991). The lack of interaction and linkages between school and home, seemed to support the development of stereotypes among both the school staff, and the parent/caregivers and the community.

The parent/caregivers believed that most teachers only cared about their paycheck, and did not have respect for the parent/caregivers. Among the participants "disrespect" is a form of violence or aggression. Previously, Mrs. Castle had felt so alienated from the school that she home-schooled Amalia and Keshia for one year. When Charles Spencer had become principal, the children had returned to Crosstown. Often paying impromptu visits to the school, she observed several occasions in which, she felt that even before the staff member would investigate the child's problem the staff member showed their prejudice. She said the staff members told the children they must have deserved any treatment they had received. So, Mrs. Castle felt that the school staff members stereotyped the children as being bad. She continued and said, "Some of them are and some of them aren't." But then she went on to do some stereotyping of her own about the teachers. She felt that many teachers were only after the money not the rewards of teaching. The reasons for the development of this attitude was not mere greed bit disdain and ultimately disrespect for the community.

> ...And most of it is just a paycheck syndrome. I just want my paycheck, and I want to go home. So they [the teachers] don't really want to be bothered. Because they don't see it as a full community. Although if you interview them, they're so..."Oh I'm so into it" and all that. "I'm so dedicated"...but you get them in a group and get them talking, all they know is the children are bad and they don't have the time to really listen to them. Another kid hits them, "oh, you go sit down. You must have deserved it." "I'm sick and tired of you". So they don't really take

> the time with the kids. They say they do it when you interview them one on one.
> Oh, yes, but they really don't.

Mrs. Castle believed that the teachers and other staff members "put on an act" to talk about their dedication. This, she felt disguised their real lack of respect for the children and the community. We now have a parallel to the conversation among the school staff. The staff viewed the parents as uncaring, and Mrs. Castle presents a view as a parent/caregiver of the staff as uncaring and not having respect for the community.

According to the literature, children tend to have higher levels of achievement (Epstein, 1987; Comer, 1984; Henderson, 1986; McCaleb, 1994; Slaughter & Epps, 1994; Steinberg, 1996; Stevenson & Baker, 1987), and the school has better discipline when parent/caregivers feel there are linkages between home and school (Erickson, 1994; Giroux, 1997; Ogbu,1974, 1978, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1994), and when parent/caregivers involvement in their children's education is valued (Edwards, 1996; Lightfoot, 1978). In a study by O'Connor (1997) with high school students and in this study, some of the children reported academic confidence and success although both they and their parent/caregivers might have felt alienated from the school.

"Acceptable" Behavior

Questions arise about the effects of the practices in the school for managing violent and aggressive behavior. It is when we view schools as disseminators of "positive knowledge" that we can understand that there is also a reinforcement or reward for behaviors viewed as acceptable in a social setting consisting of individuals representing "mainstream" culture or those who aspire to be considered members of mainstream society. Those practices and adaptations viewed as "minority" are ignored and discouraged without examination and despite similarities in the practices of the two groups.

In this study, members of the mainstream or aspirants to the mainstream are primarily represented by the professional staff members. There was a lack of communication between the professional staff and the parent/caregivers of the children. The stereotyped view formed of the children and their lives resulted in a view that life at home was different from their own middle class lives. Staff members viewed the children as having lives that were problematic, dysfunctional, and full of examples of violent behavior. Further, due to the lack of communication between the groups, professional staff members were not able to see that the ways they defined violence had more similarities than differences. Results from this study confirm research by Ladson-Billings (1994) in which "assimilationist" practices used in school do not regard the strengths of the children. As stated previously, children are thought to lack skills and must be taught everything since they do not possess knowledge of their own. As disseminators of positive knowledge (Giroux, 1997), however, professional members of the Crosstown school staff considered that their main task was to teach "appropriate" social behavior and to avoid or suppress conflict. Of course, there was no consideration that there might be differences in the ways that the African Americans might define and address conflict (Kochman, 1981). Further sources of difficulties may be the result of problems between "mainstream" society represented by the professional staff and the disdain for the culture, practices and "street" behaviors (Anderson, 1999) of minority cultures, represented by the African American children, parent/caregivers and community (Erickson, 1994; Gordon & Yowell, 1994; Keith, 1996; Kretovics & Nussel, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Tabachnick & Bloch, 1995).

"Our" situation

Mrs. Castle had seen some approaches to parenting on television specials, but she dismissed these approaches as inappropriate in "our" situation. To Mrs. Castle, it seemed that the

approaches were only for white women. In describing the difference between the approaches white women used she said,

> White women, their approach is to talk about it. They say "well ask the child not to hit you anymore" and they more on the talk thing. But I noticed in our community, we're not too much of a talker. We're much of a doer. So asking that child to stop hitting you, my thing is if they hit you, you have to hit them back.

Mrs. Castle believes that African American children have to develop different strategies from white children. In describing her approach, she advised her children, "First find out if it was an accident...you're playing." Mrs. Castle eventually told her children to hit back because, "...they were getting beat up too much..."

Focus on Deficits

Mrs. Moon said that in her view there was an imbalance between the policies and practices used in the schools and the realities involved in encouraging children to be successful in their lives. She said that a positive use of aggression might be the result of encouraging children to become successful in attaining an education. Mrs. Moon said:

> Aggression and being successful, yes, see like I said aggression can be good and bad. You know you try to get to your goal, not letting anything stop you and get into your way, aggression is good you don't want to push them to be violent but at the same time you don't want people to walk on them either. There's a balance. That's the problem, everything is off balance.

Mrs. Moon felt that her children had not received training for using aggression positively in their lives. Balance would come when the children could use aggression to become successful in achieving their goal of a good education rather than defending themselves from physical aggression at school. Both Mrs. Moon and separately, her daughter Cynthia age 12, discussed an incident in which Cynthia had taken a knife to Crosstown school while she was a student there. A boy had exposed himself to her in the stairway and Cynthia took the knife in case it might happen

again. A classroom aid saw the knife and took it away before anyone else had observed it. The knife was returned to Mrs. Moon at a later date with an explanation of the circumstances.

Mrs. Moon had experienced a difficult time with Cynthia's teachers at Crosstown during her early years at the school. The teacher had insisted that Cynthia was having difficulty with reading and wanted to recommend her for special education classes because she was "slow." Mrs. Moon, a certified teacher, was working as a substitute in the East River City school system. At home, she said, Cynthia was reading at or above grade level. She spoke with the teacher and the principal, who decided not to test Cynthia after Mrs. Moon told them about her credentials. Mrs. Moon discussed the fact that she and many of the other parent/caregivers found that problematic or threatening incidents or situations either took place in school or were related to school-based issues.

The following incident occurred while the children participated in a program centered activity. I use the dialogue from the incident here because it provides an excellent example of the reasons for the actions that occurred, and the context within which violent situations can occur. There are several ways to interpret the situation; one view of the event is presented here. Each of the parties involved believed that they had not initiated the incident but were responding to the aggressive behavior of the other. The incident centered around Azuka, a ten year old.

Children were asked to read dialogue during the daily theater group activity. Anne, one of the facilitators, had asked Azuka to read a passage of dialogue. As Azuka began to read the passage, Kahmia loudly announced, "Azuka can't read." Suma attempted to kick her under the table with her foot. Kahmia continued to speak loudly about Azuka's reading. When Suma kicked her again, harder, Kahmia shouted, and waved her fist threateningly at Suma. She said,

"*Stop* kicking me! Keep on and I'll punch you in your face." Everyone in the room became silent at the outburst. Anne, the facilitator of the group, served as mediator.

Kahmia: Get off of my arm.
Anne: I'm waiting for this to stop. Why do you guys see the need to hit at each other?
Kahmia: She just cold kicked me.
Anne: Why?
Kahmia: Cause I said Azuka can't read and you kick me [to Suma], she going to kick me [to Anne].
Anne: Tell her. Tell her in your voice why you kicked her.
Suma: Cause she said that my sister can't read.
Kahmia: You the one that told me, I asked her.
Anne: Wait a *minute* is that true [to Suma]?
Suma: No.
Anne: Why did you kick her?
Suma: Because she wouldn't be quiet.
Anne: She kicked you to be quiet [to Kahmia]. But how did you interpret it? [pointing to Suma] But how did you interpret it? [pointing to Kahmia]
Suma: Thinking be quiet.
Anne: So when you got kicked you felt what?
Kahmia: That she was kicking me just to be mean.

Suma had confided to Kahmia that Azuka could not read. Children who read on their grade level or above often receive praise. Unfortunately, when children have difficulty reading, they often feel like they have failed. Poor readers often become a target for ridicule by other children. Azuka told about her experiences of being the target of other children's teasing. Good friends were aware of her difficulty, but were able to see her abilities in other areas rather than her "dis"-abilities with reading. Azuka said that incidents like this had happened to her in her classroom whenever new students arrived, or when she was in an unfamiliar situation. She said, further, that hostilities sometimes occurred first in the classroom and then again after school hours much in the same way that this incident was an extension of classroom related problems or difficulties.

During an informal interview session, Suma and Azuka discussed their feelings. Suma said she often attempted to protect her sister from being hurt by others. Suma said that she regretted having discussed the issue with Kahmia. Azuka and Suma said they noticed that sometimes, other children would try to focus attention on Azuka's "problem" so that they could draw attention away from their personal area of weakness. They were not sure if this had been the case with Kahmia, but I thought it might be a possibility. Azuka was comfortable with the knowledge that she had difficulty reading, but Suma felt the need to keep her sister from being teased. She said that she felt a responsibility to protect Azuka from other people's unkind remarks. As the above situation evolved, Anne, the facilitator, was able to suspend the activity and focus on the two views of the problem. It was clearly a situation that did not have its source in the activity itself. The root causes for the incident lay in discussions that took place prior to this particular day and program session, from Kahmia's pushiness, and lack of compassion. The central problem was not resolved completely because other incidents and confrontations took place later in the summer. After this event between Kahmia and Suma, the theater group activity continued without other incidents for the day.

Implications

Implications of the study relate to several areas that represent a change in approach to preventing violent and aggressive behaviors. Many programs focus upon adolescents although violent behaviors are often manifested by age eight. Since younger children are viewed as "knowing nothing" or as dependent, there are issues of power and control in attempting to collaborate with rather than control students in elementary schools. Developing and using pedagogical models that emphasize the contributions and collaboration of the

students would require a change in the relationship between student and teacher. This relationship would empower all of the participants or stakeholders. A further benefit might include the positive use of conflict as an outgrowth of placing an emphasis on developing the higher order skills among low income African American students. At present, research has shown that instructional models used for low income African American students do not emphasize the development of the skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation. There has been an emphasis upon rote learning and other practices that would fit within the "banking" model of education described by Freire (1970). By developing higher order thinking skills, schools and education can address the cognitive and social interactive domains within a holistic context rather than as discrete, separable variables.

Summarized, other implications include:

- There may be a connection between policies and practices in elementary schools and the development of violent and aggressive behaviors in low income, African American elementary school children. These policies and practices seek to perpetuate a hierarchical, adult centered environment in which adults solve problems for children.
- There is a need to develop and implement pedagogical models that stress capacities and build upon the community based knowledge of the children and their parent/caregivers despite or because of their non-mainstream origins. These models would allow for differences in learning styles and preferences.
- Opportunities should be provided to develop relationships between the school staff and the parent/caregivers that would use conflict positively. This may lead to dynamic, transformative relationships in which each member is valued and within

which there is a process for solving problems and benefits all participants in the education process.

- Educators need to recognize that the school environment may be a location for violence in the lives of the children.

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